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Multiparty Collaboration for Public Benefit

Discussion Paper 2— Characterising collaboration

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2. Characterising collaboration

A variety of forms

The research team began this project with one set of expectations about what collaboration might look like. We envisaged collaborative frameworks that were formal; reciprocal; operated predominantly across public–NFP sector boundaries; and entailed the clear articulation of aims and the means by which aims would be pursued. In short, the research team began by looking at collaboration through a public administration lens.

It should be noted that our expectations were in line with our reading of the extensive academic literature on cross-sector collaboration. However, it quickly became apparent—both in the process of case selection and in our investigation of the cases themselves—that the reality on the ground did not neatly align with our initial, somewhat simplistic, framing of collaboration.

In truth, collaboration occupies a broader and more diverse spectrum of forms. Although some of the cases we examined exhibit organisational characteristics that resemble our pre-formed expectations, others do not. This leads us to conclude that there is no single organisational model of collaboration. Having said that, our investigations also lead us to conclude that there are two broad sets of characteristics that are common to effective collaborations:

1. collaborative *practice*—the behaviours, attitudes and values that support and sustain collaborative endeavour, and;
2. the authorising environment that creates the organisational spaces within which collaboration can occur.

In addition, collaboration can be inherently 'high risk' because:

1. it occurs at the intersection of competing interests contested perspectives;
2. it is sometimes highly visible and closely scrutinised by stakeholders who might harbour doubts about its prospects; and
3. it is attempting to devise a remedy to problems characterised by a long history of policy failure.

(see Appendix 2.1).

Emergent observations

A number of important observations have begun to emerge from our analysis of the data:

- Collaboration in complex and contested policy spaces needs time and dedicated resourcing;
- The trajectory of the work can be unpredictable and the scope of the work can expand despite best efforts at risk assessment;

Multiparty Collaboration for Public Benefit — Discussion Paper 2

- Dedication and personal commitment to the issues at hand are critical for maintaining focus and effective collegial relationships. They are also what sustains participants in the process when the going gets tough;
- One cannot overestimate the time, effort and emotional energy required to manage internal and external relationships in order to maintain the integrity of the process and the external legitimacy of the collaboration;
- Collaboration partners not only need to maintain and sustain the confidence and goodwill of people around the table, they need to provide appropriate assurance to their executive and board (and support the executive and board who might themselves be called upon to provide assurances to ministers or other constituencies). Partners also need to be outward looking and able to offer assurance to a range of external stakeholders—some of whom might have perspectives that are not fully aligned with the organising themes of the collaboration.
- Formal terms of reference are useful as starting points, but might unduly fetter collaboration in practice. Collaboration often has an organic quality and goalposts will change. After all collaboration usually occurs in circumstances of complexity and uncertainty—at least in social policy spaces—and a capacity for adaptability is essential.

Defining characteristics

The cases investigated for this study suggest that collaboration exhibits a number of defining characteristics:

- First, there is broad agreement amongst those interviewed that successful collaboration relies upon a kind of emotional intelligence—what we have elected to call 'collaborative intelligence. This is required of all participants.
- Second, collaboration often has a 'transgressive' quality to the extent that it seeks to serve as a vanguard for operational and cultural change.
- Third, the quality of collaboration depends to a significant degree upon the authorising environments of partner organisations, and the program/partnership logics brought to the collaboration by partners (e.g. transactional versus relational).
- Fourth, collaborations require some form of governance to provide oversight and to serve as a medium for the provision of assurance to partner organisations and other stakeholders.
- Fifth, collaboration requires a particular kind of leadership: leadership that is empathic, persuasive and capable of generating trust.

Not an end in itself

As previously stated (Discussion Paper 1) collaboration arises as a response to complexity. Equally, complexity—and its bedfellows, fragmentation, incoherence and uncertainty—creates opportunities for collaboration to occur. There is fluidity in

complexity that creates spaces for disruptive, entrepreneurial approaches. Thus, there can be an element of 'serendipity' about collaboration—sometimes a collaborative response can arise from a fortuitous collision of interests. The challenge then, is how best to take advantage of the situation and mobilise support for a collaborative approach.

Sometimes, collaboration is pursued as an end in itself. One interviewee from New Zealand expressed her misgivings about what she saw as an attempt to impose a particular model of collaboration from the top down:

It was just a blanket approach. "It's all about collaboration. This is the focus of this rollout and everyone gets an even split of the pie," as opposed to identifying what the issue is, identifying where you can make the biggest difference and then factoring that in those areas and regions.

Collaboration is only one of a range of strategies that might be utilised to leverage effective responses to social policy problems. It is essential to create a policy architecture that is 'fit for purpose', which means having a clear understanding of the problems one is attempting to address.

Collaboration can certainly be encouraged and supported by partner organisations, however, it is not an end in itself and cannot be part of command system. To be effective and responsive, collaboration requires reciprocal flows of authority from the executives of partner organisations, and legitimacy from internal and external stakeholders at the coalface.

The nature of collaborative intelligence

Collaboration makes demands of participants that take them outside their usual operational 'comfort zone'. This can be challenging, especially for people whose dominant experience is of working in hierarchical, chain-of-command organisational cultures where fidelity to process and protocol figures strongly. We argue that effective collaboration requires a special kind of emotional intelligence—let's call it collaborative intelligence, or CQ.

One interviewee remarked on the nature of CQ:

I think collaboration is often misunderstood as something that you just do. Or occasionally I hear the phrase, "barriers to collaboration", as if you've just got to break the dam and it will flow naturally. But, in my view, collaboration is a learned set of skills. It's hard; it's complex; it happens at various levels in various ways. It can happen a bit or it can happen in a very deep and enduring way. I think having a group of people that, if you like, learn on the job together how to collaborate was really critical to the success of this both in development and implementation.

CQ encompasses a number of personal attributes, such as knowing when to take charge and when to let others lead; a willingness to listen and respond nimbly to changed circumstances or new information; a capacity for empathy and the ability to see things from other people's point of view; a deep appreciation of systems and

how they intersect and interact; respect for the collaborative process itself; and the ability to forge enduring relationships based on trust.

Although many people working in the public and community sectors exhibit a capacity for high CQ, differences in organisational culture can encourage or inhibit its expression. In the community sector, whose authorising environment is shaped by fidelity to mission and values, CQ can flourish. In much of the public sector, however, whose authorising environment is often shaped by fidelity to protocol and process, CQ can struggle to find expression.

CQ is also a product of maturity and experience, and where it is lacking, collaboration cannot be effective, as observed by another interviewee:

we did have some pointy heads ... who had no interpersonal skills... [T]hose are the sorts of people—and there's no other way to dress this up—that pissed people off. This supercilious, looking-down-your-nose arrogance. Some of these people were early 20s, 25, not terribly worldly ... They'd never been in these sort of operational, real-world situations. We'd actually been out there and done stuff for 30 years; these guys come out of university with a degree.

And where CQ is in evidence, prevailing incentive structures often fail to acknowledge, encourage or reward it, as one interviewee noted:

Government, in particular, is prone to this. There's an interesting example from that workshop two or three years ago at the Crawford School. There was a presentation from Robyn Keast from Queensland who was talking about collaboration where apparently the government had seen this problem and had said, "We will, in a sense, bribe our people to stay in place because of the importance of relationships and because we know we have turnover risk. We will say to our people who are in key roles, 'You will stay where you are and get promoted in place and get your salary increments. In a sense, we will give you incentives to continue that key relationship, that key collaboration and development of collective collaborative intelligence with the community.'" But that's still rare, and it's probably much rarer at the Commonwealth level.

Collaboration as transgressive practice

The transgressive quality of collaboration derives from the fact that it usually involves the violation of accepted conventions, norms, rules and boundaries. Although some might think that the *transgressive* label exaggerates the degree to which collaboration violates organisational norms, persons interviewed for this study clearly perceive themselves to be working in ways that operate outside usually accepted bureaucratic conventions. Several interviewees invoked the aphorism 'collaboration is like designing and building an aeroplane while flying it'. They are operating in environments in which BAU no longer applies, boundaries are malleable, the limits of authority untested, practical guidance is scarce and scrutiny is intense.

For the most part, collaboration occurs in a secondary operating space (see Discussion Paper 1) in which many of the conventions of the primary operating space

do not apply in quite the same way. Furthermore, the operational and behavioural norms that will apply in this secondary operating space are to a large extent undefined—at least at the outset—and need to be co-designed and co-produced by participants. For most participants, this means *unlearning* old norms and attitudes while creating and signing up to new ones. Moreover, these new norms might only apply within the collaboration space and thus require participants to become, effectively, bi-cultural as they transition back and forth across a shifting boundary between primary and secondary operating spaces.

Collaboration is also transgressive in the sense that participants (collaboration *leads* in particular) often find themselves in the position of forcing operational or cultural change in the face of institutional or organisational resistance. The collaboration leads interviewed for our cases often speak about the need to judiciously test boundaries, to exercise (and then back up) their own judgement, to 'act first and ask for forgiveness later'.

In this light, when people are asked to 'go forth and collaborate' they are, in effect, being asked to be disruptive, in the best sense of the word. Authorisers (ministers and executives) need to understand this: they need to be cognisant of the risk that attempts to encourage collaboration might generate pushback, territoriality, complaints—and they need to be prepared to provide executive cover for their collaboration leads. It is also incumbent upon collaboration leads to keep their executive apprised of any potential repercussions and to provide them with timely briefings and assurances.

To the extent that collaboration is transgressive it entails contradictions of and challenges to institutional rules, traditional practices, functional demarcations and programmatic systems. Sometimes described as 'creative rule breaking' collaboration depends on a set of skills and aptitudes that does not entirely conform to those traditionally used in public sector recruitment.

Where, for example, public sector recruitment favours formal qualifications, functional skills and relevant past work experience—all framed within particular institutional, organisational and programmatic settings—collaboration requires intellectual nimbleness, creativity, empathic communication, tenacity and a preparedness to work 'outside the square'. This might make collaboration a 'hard sell' within Australia's public sectors, steeped as they are in hierarchical, rule-based and siloed cultures.

Authorising environment

It might be expected in collaboration settings that participants will bring to the table different expectations, framings, norms, skills and priorities. These can act as barriers to working collaboratively in some settings. On the other hand, agreeing not to be fettered by organisational, cultural or disciplinary legacy can liberate imaginations and stoke enthusiasm and commitment. This can be enabled by inclusive leadership and, ideally, should occur with executive backing within a supportive authorising environment.

Siloed behaviour in public sector organisations represents a significant barrier to effective collaboration insofar as it impedes the kind of authorising environment necessary to create a 'license' for collaboration. The notion of a 'license' to collaborate applies as much to the negotiation of collaborative relationships between partner organisations as it does to the relationship between the collaboration and the affected constituencies of interest.

In many ways the prevailing authorising environment offers disincentives to collaborative behaviour. Instead the authorising environment incentivises territoriality, strict adherence to rules-based governance regimes, and command-and-control methods of operating in which accountability is framed narrowly through a programmatic lens. It is one thing for governments and senior executives to give rhetorical support for collaborative working, but if that rhetorical support is not matched with appropriate authorisation and resources, it becomes meaningless and worse, dispiriting.

One interviewee noted the tensions that arise at the boundary between localised, bespoke initiatives and the tendency for bureaucracies to be prescriptive and directive. Bureaucracies, he suggested, often forget that they are a 'resource'; they are not the 'main game'.

A critical aspect of authorising environments in which collaborative approaches can take hold is the extent to which collaboration partners enjoy executive backing. Executive backing confers political and operational licence to collaborate and offers protection for collaborative spaces. However, as Merchant (2011) observes, the fluidity and absence of hierarchy in collaborative settings can be uncomfortable terrain for executives.

Thus we can say that partner organisations need to offer clear, unambiguous authority to collaborate. Moreover, it is essential that they acknowledge and accept that there might be an accentuated level of risk associated with the collaboration by virtue of the complexity of the operating environment. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that the integrity of the collaborative process is a function of reciprocal flows of authority from the executive to collaboration leads, and assurance from collaboration leads and partners to the executive.

Collaboration leadership

In some respects collaboration is about reconciling—or at least accommodating—diverse and nuanced perspectives on problems, and contributors to problems. Each of the policy spaces in which our cases operate involves stakeholders who work from quite different vantage points. A capacity to acknowledge, balance and valorise differences of perspective—whether cultural, institutional, disciplinary—is an essential component of collaborative leadership.

Leading collaboration requires good, innate facilitation skills. Collaborative leaders have a sound understanding of the constraints under which partners and stakeholders are obliged to operate. They know when to step in, and when to step back. As one interviewee suggested:

I think a good leader probably knows when it's time for them to step out of their own spotlight and do what they are there for but also is able to surround themselves with smart expertise within their team and put those people forward when it is more appropriate.

They need to be able to inspire people to action, demonstrate empathy, and manage egos. They require the capacity to obtain a nuanced understanding of the community, institutional and policy spaces in which they work: they understand what shapes people's perceptions, what stokes their fears and fuels their hopes.

Collaboration leaders are trusted sources of information and they are 'myth busters'. Collaboration leaders are less concerned with enacting 'bureaucratic intent' and more focussed on community activation and fostering constructive relationships based on trust and reciprocity. They often succeed in spite of the bureaucracies in which they are employed—bureaucracies that do not necessarily realise that these 'creative rule breakers' are the very people they need. Often the levels of collaboration skills represented around the table are uneven—it is a prime objective of the collaboration to raise the collaborative intelligence around the table, and this requires insightful, skilled leadership.

A consistent element in each of the cases examined for this study is the capacity for leaders to engage in respectful conversations with a wide range of stakeholders about the purpose of the collaboration. Such conversations are not simply about informing, but also about eliciting information and soliciting views; about demonstrating a capacity to listen and to give weight to people's opinions. These conversations can be a catalyst for the re-framing of issues and the articulation of new solutions and approaches. One interviewee from New Zealand emphasised that it is imperative to 'listen louder':

Listen louder, because you can't go into a collaboration with preconceived ideas about how other people might work, how other organisations might work. You have to learn that and understand that through experience. So if there's only one thing I say, it's 'listen louder'. You need to understand it before you can start passing judgment and before you can start influencing

Another interviewee from Victoria suggested that 'ego' can be 'toxic' in collaboration settings and added that 'reluctant leaders are best'.

Collaboration leaders, and active participants in collaborative endeavour generally, need a special mix of skills, knowledge and qualities. They are operating in spaces where normative organisational rules are blurred. They need to have a clear understanding of normative boundaries whilst at the same time being prepared to step over those boundaries. The following quote captures a common sentiment:

There are some fantastic people out there who just do the right thing regardless of all of those kinds of rules or regulations. But they are very rare in my experience

Effective collaboration leaders are creative, often charismatic rule-breakers, however, they are most effective when they have express authorisation from their executive to exercise initiative, and confidence that their executive will back them up. Conversely, the executive needs to have confidence in the judgement of

collaboration leaders, and assurance that they will be kept informed about any real or potential risks.

The nurturing of collaborative approaches depends heavily on executive sponsorship and the selective relaxing of the usual institutional rules. The *quid pro quo* in these understandings is that the collaboration leader will act judiciously and provide timely information and assurance to the executive. This is a 'no surprises' relationship (it is not a 'no risk' relationship). However, there can also be an inherent fragility to executive level support for collaboration owing to mobility and changing personnel, or changes in the political or operating environment.

A sentiment commonly expressed in the interviews is that leaders with the skills necessary to both maintain respectful relationships at the coalface *and* deftly manage the executive are 'uncommon' and hard to recruit because, as one interviewee astutely observed:

you needed someone that could do both, and that was very hard to find someone that could do both that also had the trust of both sides. It was very hard to do that. And more often than not it didn't work. There were trade-offs along the way, and it just didn't work. You either got one or you got the other.

Other interviewees speculated as to the reasons for this difficulty:

... that's not often how you advertise a job. You advertise with particular academic qualifications or experience. To have to steel the person to be able to weed through some of these tensions, and also to be able to do this sort of work in the prevention space where ultimately you're sitting across all of these jurisdictions, literal differences, both at a macro and micro level, being able to do that stuff sensitively and with a sense of humour. I think the sense of humour bit is the only bit that probably gets you through when you get into some of the really dark sticky bits. But being able to reach out across communities and acknowledge your privilege in the space but also that sensitivity to different things.

Yet another said:

So last week I was judging the people who have done the MPA, the masters program. And I did some judging of the presentations. This is going to sound really horrible, but it's the entrepreneurialship [sic] I think that we don't look for enough. People who are going to push boundaries and challenge. We can all be great public servants and stick to all the rules and stuff. We've got to find some rule breakers and get them into leadership roles. Then we'll really start to see some change I believe. I mean know you've got to work within the political context and stuff like that, but there's always little things you can do within the system, if you like, that kind of challenges that stuff ... And there'll be pockets of brilliance and it's kind of like how do you recognise that talent and not knock the stuffing out of them through rules of bureaucracy, because that's often what happens to those people, isn't it?

Collaboration governance

Each of the collaborations investigated for this study exhibited a set of arrangements that enables collective deliberation about:

- the rationale for and purpose of the collaboration;
- the risk environment in which collaboration will occur;
- how the collaboration will operate;
- what the collaboration seeks to deliver;
- the contributions of partner organisations;
- how best to engage internal and external stakeholders; and
- the provision of assurance and the demonstration of impact.

Some form of written instrument, such as an MOU or a contract, might prescribe the governance framework. Or the framework might be far less formal and operate through implicit reciprocal arrangements. The framework might take the form of a dedicated governance group, a steering committee or a partnership group. Whatever form it takes, governance, like collaboration itself, is about managing relationships, managing expectations, managing risks, and providing assurance to stakeholders—it is an indispensable forum for sharing information and taking stock of the environment within which collaboration is occurring:

... that's one of the reasons why the steering group is so important because at that level the steering group talks about such things as different triggers within a community, different personalities within a community, people who are ready to take on a new idea as against those that aren't. So having a bit of an idea of how people work is a really important tool.

Governance as a conduit for authority

The governance framework allows the 'authority to collaborate' to flow from partner organisations to those charged with making collaboration happen. The governance framework might be comprised of delegates from partner organisations and might even include other stakeholders, such as representatives from particular communities of interest. Although it is not unusual for the delegates to have differing levels of seniority, it is important that members have a commensurate level of authority, legitimacy and experience that enables them to engage confidently and contribute to decision-making. As one interviewee observed of their governance group:

... it was mostly very senior people, but there were some more junior bureaucrats there, and that's okay because they can build some corporate knowledge. Often with those things it's very senior people that participate in them, and it's good to have some depth.

Another interviewee described a difficulty associated with delegates whose authority to collaborate is conditional or unclear, or who have insufficient seniority or confidence to act with authority:

They feel inhibited, plus they often don't have the incentives. Most public servants still have their line responsibilities through their agencies, which goes to a budget requirement in an outcome statement for their portfolio.

In addition to participating in deliberation and decision-making, delegates to any governance framework also play a role as collaboration *champions* or *ambassadors* within their organisations and constituencies—defined succinctly by one interviewee as: *‘people that hold key influence, just influence and pull within the community’*.

Champions and influencers

Whilst it might be expected that delegates to the governance framework will act as champions for the collaboration, others outside the governance framework can also champion the purpose, aims and methods of the collaboration. In the main, these are people who are capable of exercising influence within their organisations and constituencies, and who are also supportive of the collaboration. The ‘soft diplomacy’ exercised by champions, in part by sharing good news stories and celebrating achievements, should not be underestimated. As portrayed by one interviewee:

They very much influence people that they’re connected to. We don’t have, in a sense, a lot of power and control—and we shouldn’t—over what and how information is disseminated. But the champions do because they’re out in the community, and they’re respected by the community, and they’re seen to be doing things that others would like to follow.

Locus of decision-making

The capacity of governance frameworks to make decisions might vary according to circumstances. Some governing frameworks exercise advisory functions, primarily, although depending on the seniority and formal authority of the delegates it might be argued that the provision of advice amounts *de facto* to decision-making, as illustrated in the following quote:

Well, in terms of what the authority was, the terms of reference of the ... governance group were very clearly that we were advisory. We didn’t have decision-making authority. It was about recommendations and suggestions. That said, I think we were in the best of both worlds in that because of the very good relations around the table, we were, in a sense, doing a bit of policy co-design tweaking as we went so that [lead agency CEO], who was virtually at every meeting, would take quite seriously what was being discussed and proposed. She’d actually push back when she needed to and say, “Well, that’s not going to fly with the minister,” or whatever. She would be quite frank.

Other governance frameworks—particularly those that are part of a more distributed collaboration process (see Collaboration and Scale, Discussion Paper 4)—take a more directive role:

That was the thing in those meetings that I thought was refreshing—we’d go to the meeting, we’d make a decision and it would happen. It wasn’t that we’d go to the meeting, there’d be a discussion and then a decision would happen somewhere else later on which may or may not be what the community people were looking for.

Discussion points

1. What do sponsoring organisations and their executive—particularly those in the public sector—need to understand about the nature of collaboration if they are to promote collaborative approaches in complex policy spaces?
2. How can large organisations overcome the institutional drag of path dependence to embrace the transgressive and disruptive aspects of collaboration?
3. Which aspects of the authorising environment—if any—might need to be re-engineered to better support and sustain collaborative practices?
4. What would the selection criteria and duty statement for a Collaboration Lead look like?
5. What would be a minimal set of workable functional criteria for a collaboration governance framework?

Appendix 2.1

In her article *Eight Dangers of Collaboration* Nilofer Merchant (2011) asks the question 'why is collaboration as rare as it is?'

The short answer, she says, is that collaboration is inherently 'dangerous' for several specific reasons:

1. Not knowing the answer. The fundamental premise of collaboration is that you can use it to solve complex problems that are beyond the function of one domain or expertise. That means that each participant needs to be comfortable with a certain amount of ambiguity. Most people have built their careers — perhaps even their identity — on being the expert. They don't like feeling ignorant.
2. Unclear or uncomfortable roles. Role and responsibilities in the collaboration space tend not to be hierarchical; they are often fluid, changing from phase to phase of the work. This can be especially hard for senior executives, because it may mean taking off their mantle of being the "chief of answers" and becoming part of the "tribe of doing things."
3. Too much talking, not enough doing. Collaboration means a shift from thinking big ideas alone, and more into the real-time mess of problem solving with others. Shifting work from "I tell, they do" to a "We think together" approach will appear at first to be all about talking. Like we've moved to the land of yack, yack, yack. But thinking together closes a gap. By thinking together, people can then act without checking back in because they were there when the decision got made. They've already had the debates about all the tradeoffs that actually make something work. But that means organizations spend more time in the messy and time-consuming up-front process of designing solutions that'll work.
4. Information (over)sharing. For collaboration to work, information is rarely left in any silo but is shared and often combined in unexpected ways to reframe problems. For some people, this can mean information overload. For others, who withhold information in order to retain power, the free flow of information is threatening.
5. Fear of fighting. Collaborating means dealing with conflicting priorities. "Turf" isn't always clear. If you avoid conflict, or don't know how to fight effectively, nothing will happen. Knowing how to debate the tradeoffs between many viable options means knowing how to argue with each other about the business in more open and visible ways. (I've already written about Steve Jobs doing this with his team.) Not doing it well, or doing it wrong — or simply losing? Very risky. Very dangerous.
6. More work. Often, collaboration happens on top of other work. Participants are already plenty busy with their "day job" and the new project may be especially stressful because of this. Until the problems that any collaboration project is aimed to fix gets solved, a collaboration project can often be overwhelming. Most people describe collaboration in what I call a nice-nice way: If we would just collaborate, then we would do better! But as we've already described, collaboration is about the friction of ideas and the forging of new ways of working. That is not easy, or even nice. And it makes new demands on all of us. It means leaders must do more than just tell people what to do. It also means people within the organization have to do more than say, "Hey, that thing is broken" and then delicately walk away.
7. More hugs than decisions. The fear is that if we ask for opinions we must listen to all of them, and that we'll create watered down "solutions" by committee. In that way, collaboration is often used synonymously with teamwork or democratic exchange. It shouldn't be. The goal isn't about feeling good; it is about business results. If people

Multiparty Collaboration for Public Benefit — Discussion Paper 2

have been heard, have participated in creating solutions and then know why the business picks one option over another, than we can all require what Barbara Kellerman appropriately called followership. Leaders still need to make tough calls and direct the focus. Without both Leadership with the capital L and Followership with a capital F, all we get is the equivalent of a group hug and not the results the organization needs.

8. It's hard to know who to praise and who to blame. Collaborative projects are judged on the outcome, more than the individual efforts that went into them (which are hard to even measure). Leaders have less visibility into who did what. If things go right, they worry about rewarding the wrong people. If things go wrong, they complain about no longer having a single "throat to choke."

References

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